

# situations

## **Art as a 'Public' Issue**

**Symposium  
Goethe Institute, London**

**Mark Hutchinson's Observers Response *Which Public?***

**Friday 7 November 2008**

## **Art as a 'Public Issue' Symposium**

Art as a 'Public' Issue was a one-day symposium to celebrate the launch of OPEN 14 - an anthological publication examining how art and its institutions inform notions of public space. Organised by Situations, in partnership with SKOR, the Netherlands and the Serpentine Gallery, London, this symposium brought together an international panel of writers, curators and artists to consider the interrelations of place-based practice and how ideas of 'publicness' are explored in art, its institutions and its audiences. Speakers include BAVO, Free Art Collective, Chantal Mouffe, Simon Sheikh, Sally Tallant, Mick Wilson and Tom van Gestel.

## **Mark Hutchinson offers an observers response to the symposium**

Mark Hutchinson was asked to produce an observer's response to the presentations given by the artists and theorists involved in the symposium.

## **Biography**

Mark Hutchinson is an artist, who lives and works in London. Notable writings include: *The Non-Existence of Art* (Colony gallery, Birmingham, 2007); *Inconsequential Bayonets*, a dialogue with Dave Beech *Curating Subjects*, (de Appel and Open Editions, Amsterdam & London, 2007), and the influential essay *Four Stages of Public Art*, (published in *Third Text*, 2006). Notable projects include: *(tape runs out)* at The Arts Institute, Bournemouth; *There is Always an Alternative: possibilities for art in the early nineties*, organised with Dave Beech, which was a touring exhibition, publication and symposium; *Escape From Studio Voltaire*, a solo exhibition (Studio Voltaire, London); and *Nausea: Encounters with ugliness*, with Nicola Cotton, which was a touring exhibition and publication. His current solo exhibition in Leicester is called "*The Public Does Not Exist*".

## **Which Public?**

The Art as a Public Issue conference had six main contributors, divided into three pairs. Each pair consisted of a presentation by a 'theorist' and a response by a 'practitioner'. The division between 'theorists' and 'practitioners' brought different interests to bear on the same theoretical issues. It was effective in leading to a productive tension between each 'theorist' and 'respondent,' which is to say a tension that generated a good discussion in each case. The only frustration was that there was not more time for these subsequent discussions (all three theorists overran their allotted time).

Simon Sheikh, BAVO and Chantal Mouffe each gave a presentation based on an essay in Issue 14 of the publication *Open*. The respondents were Freee, Sally Tallant and Mick Wilson respectively. Freee responded with a new artwork (a short film); Sally Tallant launched straight into a conversation with BAVO; and Mick Wilson gave a critical reading of Chantal Mouffe's position before allowing her to respond. Each pair of presentations was followed by questions from the audience.

In my response to this event I do not wish to summarise the various positions presented but rather to offer a critical engagement with some underlying assumptions which connected the various speakers in various ways. In particular, I wish to bring out two themes that ran through the conference. The first theme was the questioning of the usefulness of the idea of the Public. The second was the problem of how we are to conceptualise the relationship between art and politics. I shall address each in turn, under the heading of a question.

## **Is the Idea of The Public Obsolete?**

To say that the idea of The Public is obsolete does not imply that the individual and private is all that there is. On the contrary, what was being questioned, in different ways by the three speakers fulfilling the role of theorists, was the idea that the Public formed a coherent, unified body.

The question of how the public is constituted was the explicit theme of Simon Sheikh's paper. For Simon Sheikh the public is both an historical notion and a construction, rather than a given: both something produced and something which produces. His argument was that the idea of the public is inadequate in today's situation of multiplicity and fragmentation. Instead of a public which coheres in some way or other, we now have multiplicitous and differentiated publics, for which he proposed the analytical term post-public. His paper was framed by the question of what to put in the place of the public, in two senses: what idea might replace the idea of the public and what might it be possible to do in the erstwhile public sphere.

For BAVO, the public was an implicit rather than explicit theme. They argued against forms of art which they perceived to be not properly political; and this involved implicit assumptions about the social position of art and for whom it might be made. Some art was criticised for not putting itself in a position to reach political activists; some other art was criticised for being gallery-bound and therefore 'preaching to the choir.' Whatever else might be said here, it was obvious that BAVO had a conception of the public as radically divided: a division which necessitates the taking of sides. Within this analysis, any unified or overarching idea of The Public will seem like a violent imposition upon a situation of real conflict.

For Chantal Mouffe, politics is founded in agonism: the logical necessity of differences and antagonisms that are irresolvable. Thus the problem of the idea of The Public is that it can imply that some form of unifying consensus is possible, at least in theory. This is precisely her criticism of liberal theories of democracy, which treat conflict as the result of contingent differences that can be overcome rationally. For Chantal Mouffe, on the contrary, continual conflict is inherent to the very idea of democracy and therefore, by extension, to the idea of The Public.

These arguments agree that the trouble with the idea of The Public is that it implies a coherence and unity that is not there. This is to say that The Public is an abstract Universal. Against such an abstract Universal, each speaker urges us to see the differences and divisions between concrete individuals and groups who constitute the erstwhile public. In other words, we are being urged to recognise the abstract Universal as a misrepresentation of concrete particulars.

What is more, for each of these three speakers, in their different ways, this shift from the abstract Universal to the concrete Particular is a political commitment. However, if the abstract idea of The Public is seen to be part of a dominant political hegemony which presents particular interests as universal ones, then it is a short step to seeing politics as the task of confronting this abstraction with the real complexity of competing and irreconcilable interests. The danger here is to see multiplicity and difference as virtuous in their own right. This was not a position of anyone at the conference.

Nevertheless, there are two points to note here. The first is that such a discourse is explicitly anti-Marxist. Here, both Simon Sheikh and Chantal Mouffe baldly stated that the social must be seen as a multiplicity of struggles without a privileged term. For Marx, the proletariat is not simply one set of interests competing with others. Against the false universal of bourgeois interest, the proletariat is *truly universal* in that it is the truth of capitalism: that which is the logical foundation of capitalism and yet that which is excluded from its political and social order. For Marx, the proletariat is not a virtuous cause but the necessary point at which the contradictions of capitalism cannot be suppressed.

The second point to note is that, in itself, the logic of multiplicity and difference is not in opposition to the hegemony of Capital; indeed, it is the very stuff of contemporary capitalism. This point was central to Simon Sheikh's argument: the idea of the post-public was the attempt to think the social in terms of the fragmentation engendered by contemporary capitalism. Inasmuch as the only concern of Capital is the extraction of surplus value out of the process of the circulation of capital, it is in its interest to bring every group and individual within its ambit. Identity politics, understood as the demand of the marginalised or excluded to be recognised, represented, or included is *the* politics of contemporary capitalism. Inasmuch as the assertion of an identity is a demand to be recognised, it is a means of inclusion and, therefore, a means of expanding the sphere of capital. It opens up new possibilities and new markets.<sup>1</sup>

To reiterate, the promotion of multiplicity and difference for their own sake was not an attitude of any of the speakers. Simon Sheikh wanted to connect the idea of the post-public to "becoming:" to the idea that the public is being formed and changing rather than a static collection of competing interests. BAVO wished to privilege the experience of

those excluded from the public sphere by the dominant political conception of the public sphere. For BAVO politics is about radical activism in concrete situations: the assertion of agency rather than the demand for recognition. And for Chantal Mouffe, the whole point of agonism is that it is conflict or antagonism, rather than difference, which is fundamental: which is to say antagonism is theoretically, not just practically, irresolvable.

I have framed the discussion so far as an opposition between The Public, qua abstract Universal, and the concrete particularity of individuals and groups because I think it clearly demonstrates an inversion or shift which is very common in contemporary thinking about the public. This is to say that in a multitude of different and particular ways, there is, in contemporary discourse, a focus on multiplicity, difference and particularity. This discourse haunted the conference, in the sense that everyone had to deal with its terms, whatever their specific arguments were. What I wish to do here is question the limits of the division between abstract Universal and concrete Particular, which is, I think, the condition not only for the simple inversion into multiplicity and difference but also the nuanced attempts to avoid it. In order to do this, I'm going to take a detour through a theory of comedy put forward by Alenka Zupančič.<sup>2</sup>

Let's take an archetypal comic situation. A Baron, his Highness, is walking along when he slips, perhaps on a banana skin, and falls into a muddy puddle. His Highness is brought low: he is literally brought down to Earth. Now, conventional accounts of comedy tend to stop at this point. That is, they interpret the comic as the pricking of pretension; as the Earthly reminder of our own limitations and finitude. In this case, the Baron, who, no doubt walked around with his nose in the air, thought he was above the rest of us; when he slips and falls in the puddle, events conspire to show him that he is merely human, like the rest of us. But, as Zupancic points out, this is the structure of tragedy not comedy. The subject who loses his or her power, whether through human weakness or mere fate, is, properly speaking, tragic. Imagine carrying on the scene of the Baron in the puddle, so that he realises his whole life has been a lie, that his former belief in his own Highness has led to nothing but alienation and cruelty, and so on. It is always possible to play such a scene for laughs but its form is that of tragedy. In comedy, on the contrary, the Baron *gets up and carries on*. This is why Zupančič says that conventional accounts of comedy stop too soon: the truly comedic dimension is not the fall to Earth but the carrying on despite the fall. In the hypothetical case of the Baron, the true object of comedy is the Baron's unshakeable belief in his own Highness.

So good comedy does not present us with our own finitude but, on the contrary, demonstrates that what is truly most human about us is our absolute refusal to accept our human finitude. We can see evidence of this in the fact that, generally speaking, the comedic universe is the universe of the indestructible, whether that which is indestructible be a person, a thing or a belief. In comedy, many things fail, fall apart or are otherwise destroyed but these are props which demonstrate a central indestructibility. This is clearly demonstrated in cartoons. For example, in Tom and Jerry, every thing is expendable except for Tom and Jerry themselves. When, say, Tom is literally flattened by a steamroller, he simply pops back into shape and carries on chasing Jerry. Once again, imagine how far we would be from comedy if instead we got a mess of broken skin and bones, oozing flesh and blood. We could say that it is Tom's desire for the pursuit of Jerry which is shown to be unstoppable. The comedic marks a point of insistence, where something insists and repeats unwaveringly.

For Zupančič, following Hegel, this is all a question of the Universal. The comedic is the

indestructible because it is the universal and universals are, by nature, indestructible. It is, however, not the abstract Universal but the universal in action: it is the concrete universal. Before the puddle, the abstract Universal of the Highness of the Baron was far removed from the Particulars of the material world. However, in a truly comedic movement or transformation, the Universal and the Particular *swap places*. In the encounter with the puddle, what was most concrete - the banana skin, the puddle - become mere abstract props for staging what is now most concrete: the Barons unshakeable belief in his own Highness.

What is the relevance of this here? Well, in our case, the idea of The Public is obviously the abstract Universal and nowadays nobody wants to give it the time of day. In place of an idea of The Public, we have an emerging consensus about a multiplicity of publics or a post-public condition. What does this mean? It means we are concentrating on the Particular, on the differences in the multiplicity of public sites, institutions and individuals. The point I wish to consider is that if we stop here we may have stopped too soon. There are two ways in which we could oppose the abstract Universal (in which no-one believes anymore); it can be opposed either by a multiplicity of particulars or by the concrete universal.

To illustrate the difference between a multiplicity of particulars and the concrete universal, we could look at the tentative distinction Zupancic makes between bad comedy and good comedy. Bad or conservative comedy, is when the Universal comes down to Earth only to reassert its universal character in *contrast* to the Particular. This is a formula of addition. The Baron is only human but he *is also* the Baron, which is to say he is still different from everyone else. In medieval times it was common to have a day of misrule, where the village idiot ruled for the day and the Baron was the idiot. But far from undermining his rule, this was a way that the Baron asserted his power. Everyone knew that tomorrow things would be back to normal. Good comedy, in contrast, has to pull off the trick of showing that it is at the moments when the Baron believes most in his Baronness that he is most human. Before he fades away into history, we can use the example of George W. Bush as an illustration. When, in carefully orchestrated media opportunities, Bush jokes about his golf whilst talking about serious policy decisions, he demonstrates the formula of addition. Here we should invert the idea that 'He may be the President but he is also just an ordinary guy' to get 'He may be an ordinary guy but he is still the President.' On the other hand, when he is trying his hardest *to be* the President and yet what came out of his mouth are the famous Bushisms, we get the formula of him carrying on as President despite being up to his neck in the muddy puddles of language.

It is worth noting that this tentative distinction between good and bad comedy can be applied directly, if tentatively, to art. One way to think about bad art, or perhaps one form of bad art, consists of a formula of addition in which that which is unproblematically Art *also* partakes in something ordinary, everyday, transgressive or whatever. This is to say that this bad Art incorporates, appropriates or comes into contact with some non-Art - something excluded from it - but that this encounter is staged in such a way that the identity of the Art, qua Art, is never in question. The particular non-Art thing cannot infect or contaminate Art in the same way as Bush's Presidency is immune from any amount of golf. The Particular does not threaten to transform the Universal because they are on different registers. Good art, like good comedy, has to do something other than bring about the encounter between the Universal and the Particular. The transformation of art has to arise out of art itself rather than out of the transgression of the border between art and non-art. Good art has to leave behind the abstract Universal Art, which is to say the

very idea of Art. The good artist has to manage without Art as the ultimate guarantor of what the artist does; she must keep going without guarantees, without the comfort that what she is doing is art.<sup>3</sup>

The concrete universal is not about identity nor ideas but about a certain *movement*. It is nothing but movement. In terms of the public, we could say that it is not about any existing public, whether a unified Public or a multiplicitous post-public. Rather, we could say that the concrete universal exists in the *calling forth of a new public*. It is something that emerges out of a process of transformation.

Slavoj Žižek is fond of quoting a quip of Brecht's, apropos the East German government of the time - 'would it not be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect another.' Žižek's rejoinder is that this is exactly what a revolutionary party should be doing.<sup>4</sup> The old society, that which has been overthrown in Law, nevertheless persists in the everyday habits and customs of the people: hegemony and ideology are embedded in social practice, which is to say in the very subjectivity of people. The distinction I wish to consider here is that between subjectivity and consciousness. If we think of hegemony as merely the struggle for conscious ideas, we will miss its unconscious dimension: the way hegemony is enacted not thought. Any revolution will fail unless it can transform social practices. Which is to say any revolutionary process must call forth new forms of subjectivity: it must make a new people. It is not enough to rearrange what exists already: to redistribute power and wealth and so on. Old values exist not as ideas but as habits.

### **How are we to conceptualise the relationship between art and politics?**<sup>5</sup>

Each of the three main speakers seemed to experience some incomprehension in the response each received from his or her respective respondent. Simon Sheikh wondered aloud what Freee's film had to do with his paper; BAVO seemed bewildered by Sally Tallant's forthright attempt to describe in positive terms the work they attacked under the heading of NGO art; and Chantal Mouffe behaved like a professional politician in repeatedly avoided Mick Wilson perspicuous questions by sticking to her well-oiled philosophical discourse.

Whereas the 'theorists' presentations were addressing the relationship between art and something else (the post-public; political activism and capitalist hegemony, respectively), the respondents were largely concerned with the assumptions about the identity of art that underlay these positions. That is to say, for the three 'theorists', art may be multiplicitous but it is not, in itself, problematic; for the respondents, it was precisely the assumption that art was not problematic that was problematic.

Sally Tallant tried to engage BAVO in a direct confrontation about where the value of an artwork was to be found. BAVO conceptualised two forms of bad public art. The first they called NGO art. This is public work made, in some way, in conjunction with particular communities or groups but which is sanctioned and administered by official bodies. BAVO's claim was that such work is compromised by its official status; although it might have the form of a kind of engagement with political activism, it cannot be controversial or confrontational in practice without jeopardising the artist's chance to get more funding and opportunities. The second kind of bad art they put forward was the strategy of 'making art political,' identified as that which had overtly political content but remained firmly within the sphere of art and aesthetics. Discussion focused largely on their claims

about NGO art. Sally Tallant and others in the audience wished to defend the works they attacked by pointing out their complexity and interest. BAVO's response was to reiterate what the work could not do, which was to engage in political activism.

Inasmuch as BAVO's critics wanted to talk about art, what they did not do was to engage with BAVO's conception of politics. In a nutshell politics, for BAVO, is synonymous with radical political activism. Therefore, within this view, for art to be political it must form some kind of alliance with radical political activism. Whilst 'NGO art' has the form of activism without radical content, 'making art political' has radical content without the activist form. In the end, art which remains on the territory of art is perceived as depoliticising, *regardless of its content*, simply because of its distance from radical political activism. This position is far from being beyond criticism but, I think, any criticism of BAVO should start from their conceptual division of art and politics rather than the attempt to defend the particular content of particular artworks. For BAVO, in order for art to become political it must make some form of alliance with that which is properly political: political activism which resists and opposes dominant, oppressive social forces. The question becomes not only whether this is an adequate conception of politics but how this theory positions art.

Chantal Mouffe rehearsed her well known theories of agonism and hegemony. Agonism is the theory that there is necessary and irresolvable antagonism at the heart of democracy; hegemony is the theory that society is structured by a dominant symbolic order. What became obvious, both from her talk itself and under cross-examination from Mick Wilson, was that she reserved these terms for the way society is structured as a whole. She was hostile to the application of the idea of hegemony to the local: in particular as a term that could be applied to art. For her, art is in a position to *contribute* to an agonistic, hegemonic struggle but it would be a category mistake to think of agonism or hegemony as operating *within* art.

For Chantal Mouffe, art is fundamentally and unproblematically about identity and representation. In other words, for her, art fosters identification and gives voice to different groups or individuals. She seemed both bemused and defensive when Mick Wilson suggested that her position could be read as giving the artist a privileged position. He wondered if she reproduced the *structure* of the gap between appearance and reality, when she posited the artist as someone in a *position* to represent someone else's interests or a concrete historical situation. Her response was that artists were "where they belong and where they have always belonged," as organic intellectuals with "a role to play" in a broader hegemonic struggle. From this perspective, any conflict within art is a matter of content - being an adequate or useful contribution to the hegemonic struggle - or not. To this end, the only division she made within art was between critical and non-critical art. It is critical art that fosters counter-hegemonic identifications and "gives a voice to the excluded." Critical art is a question of commitment and content. The point I wish to emphasise here is that *art* is not considered as either something determined by hegemonic struggle nor as something that could be the site of hegemonic struggle. For all their differences, what Chantal Mouffe shared with BAVO was the idea that art should join in an existent political struggle. For neither was the constitution of art itself (as opposed to its functioning) a site of social division and struggle: something both produced by and producing social division.

Simon Sheikh, in articulating the idea of the post-public, did not offer any prescriptions for art. However, his analysis of the post-public condition, as the double movement of

dematerialisation and expansion of what could be considered public, is part of an analysis of the contemporary, political situation of art. Freee's response to his analysis was to bring art into the equation in an emphatic way – by making an artwork. Freee's film showed the members of Freee in the public sphere but it showed this as a difficult place to be. Freee pictured themselves in the public sphere but they were not trying to put something in the place of the public (in either sense). Rather, the public sphere was shown to be a place of a certain kind of impossibility for the artists vis-a-vis the public.

Freee's film was called "Everyone Is a Guerilla Advertiser (After the Revolution)." It was perhaps symptomatic that in the general discussion of this work no-one mentioned the title. The brackets - the appeal to a moment after the revolution - connected the work both to an avant-garde past, in which a passion for politics and art could coincide, and a utopian future, in which neither politics nor art might exist. Moreover, it articulated the impossibility of a certain kind of action in the present: an absence not of actuality but of possibility. The film showed the members of Freee wandering around the crowded centre of London, displaying boards with slogans written on them. As they wandered amongst the crowd, the person filming them ran around, with the camera running, trying to capture them and their slogans. In other words, the work was not only a documentation of an elaborate performance but of the difficulties foisted on the person with the camera trying to record it. This was not aimed at the immediate audience, the crowd amongst which Freee and the person with the camera moved. The crowd did not exist as an audience for this art. And the general point to be made is that, given the current constitution of both society and art, it is not currently possible for a crowd to be an audience for art. Although operating within the public sphere, which becomes an integral part of the situation of the artwork, the artwork is work upon the possibilities of art rather than on any putative public. Inasmuch as Freee stand by their words and their works, this is an attempt to find collaborators and sympathisers. But the single point I wish to bring out in the context of this essay, is that prior to making any work, Freee are operating with an understanding that art is always already divided: suffering from absences, ills, conflicts, exclusions and so on. The political point is that in relation to art we should not jump straight to an understanding of the public as divided or multiple without addressing the ways in which art is itself divided.

Any assumptions about what art is and does need to be seen in contrast to the idea that every moment in the production and reception of art is a site of struggle, division, contestation, absences, exclusions and lacks. There is a way in which we could think of art as constituted by the struggles within it. This is to say that art is neither something ready formed that subsequently enters into a relationship with politics or the social nor a fixed or stable practice embedded within the social; rather, social division is the very stuff out of which art comes to be. Art is made out of hegemonic ideas that are present at every moment at every level of art practice: they are the DNA of artistic habit.

This entails, against the idea that art has a role to play in the process of political transformation, that both art and politics need to be transformed. Art is not detached from the social and does not have the privilege of a critical distance from which it can put itself at the service of politics. Thus radical art cannot be social critique in any other way than the transformation of the very co-ordinates of art. Art is constrained by its conventional and accepted identity: by the idea of art. Indeed, if we accept such questions as 'what is the contribution art can make to the hegemonic struggle?' or 'how can art give voice to the excluded?' or, perhaps, 'what is the connection between art and politics?' it is possible that we have already capitulated to a dominant hegemonic idea of

what art is and what it does. In other words, it is possible that such questions are themselves hegemonic inasmuch as they presuppose what art is and what it can do. Ideology, we might say, is in the question not in the answer.

If we start from a division between art and politics, however we might attempt to blur, suture or otherwise impugn or negotiate that division, the danger is that we might have implicitly accepted some kind of potential unity or identity within the field of art. If, on the other hand, we begin not simply from the divisions within art but the idea that art is constituted by its divisions, founded on what is excluded from it, then we can see that art is thoroughly political in and of itself from the very beginning. The attempt to make art political only goes to obscure that fact that art already is political.

#### Endnotes

1 For a sustained critique of identity politics in this vein, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, Verso, London, 2001.

2 For the succinct argument see the essay *The Concrete Universal and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It*, in *Lacan: the Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, . For an expanded treatise on comedy, see *The Odd One In*, MIT Press, 2008.

3 The distinction between non-art and anti-art is of the utmost importance here. Anti-art is the precise name, I would argue, for the emergence of the concrete universal against the abstract Universal. As such, the negation implied by anti-art is very specific and in no way entails the general nihilistic position which is routinely attributed to it.

4 See Žižek's afterword to Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum, London, 2004/5, pp. 74- 75

5 In relation to the question Chantal Mouffe, in her Open essay, states explicitly that there is no need to construct a relationship between art and politics because one should not see art and politics as two separately constituted fields: politics already has an aesthetic dimension and art a political one. However, apart from the easy conflation of art with aesthetics, this seems to beg the question: it is unclear how having a dimension might preclude having a relationship.

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